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11 April 1966

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam

SUMMARY

A Buddhist political victory in the current Vietnamese crisis would almost certainly entail a temporary setback to U.S. objectives and programs but would not necessarily portend total disaster. For all their obstreperousness, irrationality and occasional fecklessness, the Buddhists are a potent political factor in South Vietnam which no Vietnamese government can ignore or avoid coming to terms with in some manner. Despite the fact that the political bonzes (e.g., Tri Quang) do not necessarily speak for or represent the true aspirations of all South Vietnamese Buddhists, they do have a more effective, mass-based political organization than anyone else in Vietnam other than the Communists. The Buddhist leaders are not Communists and their long-term political objectives are essentially similar to ours, though their tactical behavior often aids the Communist cause. Should these Buddhist leaders succeed in bringing to power a government under their control, the U.S. would face a delicate and Byzantine political game. The struggle in Vietnam would not be over, however, and if the transition period can be weathered and the initial problems overcome, the longer-term consequences of a Buddhist victory could turn out very much to our advantage.

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I. Statement of the Problem

This memorandum is an exercise in hypothetical speculation. Nothing said herein should be construed as questioning the desirability of preserving the Directory structure of the present GVN or the fact that in the present complex crisis U.S. interests would be best served if the "second option" set forth in Ambassador Lodge's 3817 could somehow be carried through with reasonable success. Nor should this memorandum be read as a prediction that this course of action will necessarily fail. We are simply attempting a speculative analysis of what South Vietnam might look like if it does fail, i.e., if the current crisis should end in a complete political victory for the Buddhists.

Taking a Buddhist victory as a hypothetical "given", this memorandum addresses itself to such problems as: What would the new GVN look like institutionally? What internal stresses would plague it? What assets would it have? How effective would it be? What policies would it endeavor to follow, particularly vis-a-vis the war and the Viet Cong? How would U.S. interests be affected? What points of leverage would the U.S. have, if any? What policy options would be open to the U.S. and which ones should be followed?

II. Tri Quang and His Objectives

If the Buddhists succeed in toppling the present GVN and installing a government responsive to their wishes, the net result will be a victory for Tri Quang, who will become at least temporarily the most powerful political figure in South Vietnam. Any estimate of what a Buddhist-dominated government would look like or try to do must hinge on an estimate of what Tri Quang wants and how effective he can be in directing rather than opposing a political structure.

Tri Quang is infinitely complex and uniquely Vietnamese. He is vain, equates "the peoples'" wishes with his own prestige, and thoroughly enjoys playing the game of politics for its own sake. He is nationalistic to the point of xenophobia, a consummate master of the arts of agitation and pressure, and without question the most effective politician now active in South Vietnam. No one really knows what he wants, in concrete terms, and he himself probably could not spell out his positive objectives with any great degree of precision.

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We doubt if Tri Quang is himself a Communist. In talking with Americans he is most eloquently persuasive re the incompatibility of the Communist doctrine with Buddhist beliefs and the short shrift all he professes to stand for as a religious leader would receive under a Communist regime. Among the Vietnamese he has always been one of the strongest advocates of the policy of exerting physical pressure on the north. His recommendations on the bombing campaign go considerably beyond those of the most strident American hawks. It could be contended that he espouses such views only to disguise his true sentiments but this argument is simply not convincing to one who has personally discussed such subjects with him.

The problem with Tri Quang is that his tactical political skills are not grounded in any broad sense of political perspective. He is brilliant and sophisticated in analyzing immediate issues, but naive and childish on larger questions. By our standards, his political opinions are often self-contradictory and sometimes irrational. He finds it impossible to look beyond the tactics which will achieve his immediate objective and see the possible longer-term consequences of his actions. In this sense he is not a responsible figure. Furthermore, he is so imbued with an awareness of his own cleverness, so fond of exercising his tactical talents, that there is always the danger that to achieve an immediate objective he will uncork djins without appreciating how difficult it may be to get them back in the bottle. Specifically, there is always the danger that he may make the mistake others have made in other countries (with uniformly disastrous results) in thinking he can "use" the Communists as temporary tactical allies but shuck them once they have served his immediate purpose.

On balance we are inclined to think that Tri Quang probably wants an independent South Vietnam, under Buddhist control and not subject to Communist political domination. He almost certainly recognizes that such a government will have to run with the grain of Vietnamese regional loyalties and accommodate non-Buddhist groups such as the Catholics, the Cao Dai, and the Hoa Hao. He also probably recognizes that his goals cannot be achieved without U. S. support and assistance. Thus there is almost certainly a good deal of congruence

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between our long-range objectives for Vietnam and his. Even if this is a valid assessment of what Tri Quang wants, however, the fact still remains that he is reluctant to accept responsibility and his demonstrated capacity for directing protest is not matched by any demonstrated capacity for constructive management. His hyper-sensitive nationalism will inevitably complicate his attitudes toward the United States and the net result of his actions -- whatever the intent behind them -- may ultimately prove of greater benefit to the Viet Cong than anyone else in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, whatever happens in the immediate future, Tri Quang will remain a potent factor in Vietnamese politics which the U.S. and any GVN will have to recognize and, somehow, reckon with.

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III. Institutional Structure

From their public statements and comments made in private conversations with various U.S. officials it appears that the Buddhists would establish a unicameral legislative body, initially composed of representatives named by the provincial and municipal councils elected in May 1965. This body would have the dual function of drafting a constitution and constituting an interim assembly which would designate a Chief of State and the GVN's principal executive officers. We cannot be sure whom the Buddhists would name to the GVN's more important public posts but would not be surprised if they invited someone like General Duong Van ("Big") Minh to serve (as a civilian) as Chief of State and named one of their own civilian activists such as Bui Tuong Huan, the present rector of Hue University, to serve as Premier. The ministerial posts would probably be staffed with younger Buddhist intellectuals and perhaps some Buddhist oriented army officers. There would, of course, be a wholesale change of province chiefs.

We doubt if any of the more prominent bonzes such as Tam Chau or, particularly, Tri Quang would serve in any responsible executive post. Tam Chau might agree to be a member of either the interim or permanent legislative assembly; Tri Quang almost certainly would not. The initial body would be very much Buddhist-dominated and highly responsive to the wishes of the political bonzes, particularly Tri Quang. It would press for early elections to a more permanent body and tend to dismiss practical or political objections to such elections. These elections, would be rigged to produce a Buddhist-dominated body, but the elected assembly would almost certainly include some figures such as Dr. Pham Quang Dan who are not puppets of the Buddhist leadership.

IV. Stresses

A Buddhist-controlled government would be viewed with resentment and great apprehension by other political groups in South Vietnam. The Catholics, especially northern refugee Catholic militants, would be deeply disturbed. Some Catholic groups (e.g., the northern followers of Father Hoang Quynh) would almost certainly attempt some form of agitation or protest demonstration, generating additional turmoil at least in the Saigon area. Faced with a choice between a Buddhist-controlled GVN and the Viet Cong, however, most Catholics would probably decide (with varying degrees of reluctance) that they had no choice but to go along with the new government, hoping for the best while expecting the worst.

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Other minority elements within the Vietnamese body politic such as the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai would also be disturbed, though probably less intensely so than the Catholics. These groups' potential for agitation in Saigon is fairly slight. Southerners (i. e., Cochinese) would regard a Tri Quang-dominated government as one controlled by "centrists" and would resent this on regional grounds. Local areas in which minority groups are particularly strong (e. g., the Hoa Hao-controlled delta province of An Giang) might more or less secede from the central government for a time, though the total political consequences of such local secessions would be far less severe than something like the secession of I Corps.

Buddhist acquisition of political power would cause deep stresses within the GVN military establishment. Some officers, particularly Catholic officers, would almost certainly think in terms of pre-emptive coup attempts to depose the Buddhists and reassert military rule. There would certainly be periods of tension and unrest. On balance we are inclined to doubt if a new Buddhist government could soon be overthrown by military die-hards, but this is a judgment that cannot be offered with any great degree of assurance. As with the civilian Catholics, military die-hards would find themselves faced with the unpalatable choice of the Buddhists or the Viet Cong and would probably opt for the Buddhists. Over the short run, at least, the unity and interim effectiveness of the GVN military establishment would be damaged. How permanent that damage would be and how soon it could be repaired cannot now be confidently predicted. Given the degree of at least latent support for the Buddhists prevalent throughout the South Vietnamese military establishment (particularly in enlisted and junior officer ranks), the ultimate result might be an even greater degree of unity within the military establishment than now exists and a greater sense of identification between the army and the populace.

There is no reason to believe that, once in power, the Buddhists would be more monolithic than any other Vietnamese group. There are already obvious divisions within Buddhist ranks: Tam Chau and his predominantly northern followers (now settled in the Saigon area) are restive at according primacy within the Buddhist movement to Tri Quang and his Central Vietnam-based faction. Southern Buddhists (e. g., Mai Tho Truyen and his supporters)

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are not at all happy with Tri Quang's current pressure campaign. During this period of struggle moderate voices are muted (as sometimes happens elsewhere, for example within the civil rights movement in the United States), but if a Buddhist government were established, the Buddhist movement itself would display internal stress and disagreement.

V. Weaknesses

A Buddhist-controlled government such as we have described would initially find it difficult to exert effective centralized authority throughout the country. It would be beset with squabbling, irresolution, and unrealism within its paramount parliamentary body. There would be jockeying for power and position even among Buddhist factions. The pace and tempo of the counterinsurgency effort would almost certainly be temporarily checked and the implementation of current programs at least temporarily arrested. During the inevitable period of transition and adjustment, the burden of containing the Viet Cong would fall primarily on U.S. and allied forces.

Many of these weaknesses and deficiencies which would inevitably plague a new government at the time of its installation, however, would not necessarily be permanent. If U.S. and allied military strength could prevent the Communists from making too many inroads during the period of unsettled transition, certain latent strengths and assets of a Buddhist-dominated regime might then come productively into play.

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VI. Assets

A new Buddhist-dominated government would have some political assets not enjoyed by any of its predecessors. Apart from the Communists, the Buddhists have the only effective mass organization in Vietnam and their political structure has deeper popular roots, particularly in Central Vietnam and along the coastal strip north of Saigon, than any other Vietnamese political body. The extent to which the Buddhists are capable of marshalling their followers in support of rather than in opposition to a government remains to be seen, but a Buddhist government would have at least a potentially stronger and broader popular base than any of its predecessors.

"Buddhism" as a politico-religious idea is capable of touching deep emotional chords within large segments of the Vietnamese people. A touchily nationalistic Buddhist government would be something Communist propagandists would not find it easy to attack, particularly since the natural opponents of such a government (e.g., the Catholics) are unalterably opposed to Communism and would not wittingly enter into an alliance with the Viet Cong.

VII. Policies

Tri Quang, Tam Chau and other political bonzes who have discussed Buddhist objectives with U.S. officials have all claimed that the Buddhists alone can "legalize" the U.S. position in Vietnam, that they are anxious for continued U.S. support, that with U.S. assistance they want to pursue the work of social revolution, and that they realize the impossibility of accommodation or negotiation with the Communists under present circumstances. By implication at least, they claim they want to prosecute the war. The sincerity of these professed objectives is perhaps open to question and the way they would be translated into concrete governmental policies certainly cannot be confidently predicted at this time. There is at least an even chance, however, that the responsibilities of power would be as sobering to the Buddhists as they are to all successful revolutionaries. Furthermore, the intelligent and sophisticated anti-Communism that the Buddhist leaders profess to endorse would almost certainly be reinforced if, once their followers were in power, the Buddhists discovered that Viet Cong elements who have succeeded in penetrating the present "Struggle Movement" were unwilling to suspend their agitation and disruptive activity.

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Communist propagandists have never attacked Tri Quang himself but they have attacked Tam Chau and other elements of the "Struggle Movement". The excesses of Communist penetrations of "struggle groups" have already given non-Communist elements therein grounds for openly expressed concern. If the Buddhists succeed in toppling the present GVN and replacing it with one under Buddhist control, the Communists almost certainly will not cease their disruptive activities. Theoretically one might argue that in their own interests the Communists would lie low and encourage the establishment of a new Saigon regime with which they could then fruitfully negotiate, but the Vietnamese Communists do not reason and probably will not act in this fashion. Thus one net result of the current struggle will probably be the implanting in Buddhist circles of a heightened awareness for the need for combating the Communist menace. If they ever became totally engaged in the anti-Communist fight, the Buddhists would be more potent political adversaries than any of the Viet Cong have yet faced.

There is little question that the Buddhists emotionally resent the present extent of U.S. involvement in Vietnamese affairs and the sheer physical magnitude of the current U.S. presence in Vietnam, with all the side effects it inevitably entails. Nor is there any doubt that the Buddhists would ultimately like to see the Americans go home. Since this is also our ultimate objective, however, longer-term Buddhist interests are not necessarily incompatible with ours. Whether the Buddhists would want us out soon and in a manner which would result in an inevitable Communist victory remains to be seen. On balance we believe they would not, even though their short-sightedness might prompt them to act in ways involving the serious risk of producing just this effect. A Buddhist-dominated government would be a prickly ally often exasperating to deal with, but one whose fundamental political objectives would probably be essentially similar to our own.

VIII. Effectiveness

There is little question that, at the onset, a new Buddhist-dominated government with strong civilian participation, brought to power by pressures causing a drastic loss of face to the military

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establishment, would be far less effective in prosecuting the war and the course of social development than the present regime. As indicated above, there would be a very sticky and dangerous period of transition during which only U.S. and allied military might would prevent a Communist seizure of power. Given the latent popular base that a Buddhist government would have, however, and the organizational talents which the Buddhist leadership has displayed, it is not inconceivable that from this shaky beginning there could evolve a uniquely Vietnamese government which, over the long run, would not only be tolerably effective but would enjoy solid popular support. The road would be rocky indeed, but it could ultimately lead to something approaching genuine political stability.

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IX. U.S. Policy Options

In the hypothetical situation postulated as the basis of this memorandum's discussion--the downfall of the present GVN and its replacement by a Buddhist-dominated government--the U.S. would have essentially three policy options:

a. To work with dissident military groups, Catholics, and other anti-Buddhists in an attempt to overthrow the new government and install some form of regime (probably military) not under Buddhist control.

b. To write Vietnam off as lost and attempt to disengage and withdraw as rapidly and gracefully as possible.

c. To work with the new government and see how things develop while deciding on the best course of future action.

Option (a) would have virtually no chance of succeeding. If events follow the course assumed for the purpose of our discussion, the new Buddhist government could not be deposed unless the U.S. were willing to take a direct hand in Vietnamese internal affairs in a way that could not be concealed. We would probably have to employ U.S. troops to put our chosen instruments back in power. Such action would enable the Communists to tar us with the charge of being successor colonialists to the French in a manner they have never yet succeeded in doing. Many Vietnamese now opposed to the Buddhists--and the Communists--would immediately join forces with them in opposing us, the common enemy. Such action would fatally flaw the whole rationale of our position and virtually ensure our political defeat in Vietnam.

Option (b) is not politically or technically feasible at the present time. If we tried to adopt it we would be openly justifying the position of all those who have criticized our present Vietnamese position over the past years and months. The net result would be a political debacle, a windfall for Hanoi and Peiping which would have political repercussions not only internationally but also domestically within the United States.

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Option (c), chancy and unpalatable as it may be, thus constitutes our only realistic course of interim action. For it to be pursued with any hope of success we must be entirely realistic about the Buddhists' organizational strengths and weaknesses, their ambitions, and the difficulties and frustrations that will inevitably be involved in trying to work in association with them. At the same time, however, we must at all costs avoid being maneuvered into the position where the Buddhists or key Buddhist leaders (e.g., Tri Quang) become our "adversaries". We must also recognize that the intense and sincere nationalist sentiments found within Buddhist ranks give us our best points of leverage. With great finesse, we will have to keep the Buddhists constantly aware of the fact that their aspirations would be doomed were the Communists ever to gain control of South Vietnam, make them mindful of the fact that Communist victory is inevitable without continued U.S. support, and make them equally mindful of the fact that such support is contingent upon a modicum of responsibility and sensible behavior on their part.